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ABSTRACT

Recent research in second language acquisition (SLA) suggests that cultural pluralism can be an effective approach to assisting immigrants blend into the majority society. This handbook was designed to assist educators to be responsive and sensitive to the needs of a group of Kurdish political refugees who recently resettled in Idaho. It provides information on Kurdish culture and society, potential intercultural barriers that may be encountered within American schools and society, and practical suggestions for meeting children's educational needs. The handbook is based on library research, interviews with local school staff and community agencies, and first-hand observations and interviews of the Kurdish community. The handbook focuses on how Kurdish customs may conflict with American cultural and educational beliefs and practices. The educational suggestions it advances are based on established SLA theory and practice and reflect trends toward whole-language, student-centered learning. (Contains 26 references.) (MDM)

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THE KURDISH CHILD IN AMERICA:

A HANDBOOK FOR EDUCATORS

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Summer 1993

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THE KURDISH CHILD IN AMERICA: A HANDBOOK FOR EDUCATORS

Master's Degree project by Linda Rytterager

ABSTRACT

Recent research in second language acquisition suggests that cultural pluralism can be an effective approach to assisting immigrants blend into society. Use of students' first language and culture in the curriculum can enhance second language acquisition (SLA) by promoting a positive cultural identity, reducing anxiety, and enhancing attitude and motivation. Pluralism is an important ingredient of successful programs of minority education, yet educators seldom have the awareness and information of their students' cultures needed to facilitate a pluralistic approach. This work aims to assist educators to be responsive and sensitive to the needs of a group of Kurdish political refugees who recently resettled in Idaho. Written in handbook form, it provides information in three areas: (1) Kurdish culture and society; (2) potential intercultural barriers that may be encountered within American schools and society; and (3) practical suggestions for meeting children's educational needs. Data was gleaned from library research, interviews with local school staff and community agencies, and extensive first-hand observations and interviews of the Kurdish community. Beyond describing Kurdish culture, the handbook aims to depict how Kurdish customs may conflict with American cultural and educational beliefs and practices. The educational suggestions, based on solid SLA theory, reflect trends toward whole-language, student-centered learning. It is hoped that the data will assist Kurdish children to integrate smoothly into American society by helping educators to understand, accept and celebrate their unique culture.

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INTRODUCTION

This handbook is intended to provide information and practical suggestions to teachers and other community members working with Kurdish refugees. Recent strife in the Middle East has led to the arrival of a large number of Kurdish immigrants from northern Iraq. These Kurds are very different from other immigrants to the United States. Their sociopolitical history as a repressed and often-displaced minority group, and denial of their cultural identity has !eft them without a national homeland or standardized language. Forcible removal from their homes and evacuation to refugee camps disrupted their livelihood and education, and caused great psychological stress. Th Kurds are unlike otheer middle-eastern immigrants in that they are not Arabic. Yet they are an ancient people, with roots extending back to the days of Mesopotamia. Also unlike other immigrants to America, the Kurds are rural people, unaccustomed to city life and with much less exposure to western culture. This unusual set of circumstances presents a unique challenge to those assisting Kurdish families to integrate into American society.

It is hoped that this guide will be useful to the many educators interested in ameliorating obstacles facing Kurdish families. Part 1, an overview of Kurdish cultural and social background, provides information for those who seek basic knowledge of the Kurdish people or for use in the classroom as starting point for Kurdish studies. Part 2 examines the impact of immigration and American life on modern Kurdish families with an eye to helping avoid barriers to communication. It is thus designed for classroom teachers, specialists, and administrators who wish to better understand the experiences of these students and their families. Part 3 summarizes some of the research in ESL education and offers practical suggestions for meeting the needs of this special group in our classrooms. It was written especially for classroom teachers and content-area instructors who want specific recommendations and strategies for teaching.

Kurdish students begin school with childhood experiences vastly different from those of other youngsters. To enhance their prospects for academic success, schools must be responsive to their special

needs. If this handbook succeeds in helping educators better understand the experiences, culture, and society of the Kurdish people in America, then it will have reached its goal of easing the blending of these immigrants into American schools and society.

PART 1
KURDISH CULTURAL HERITAGE

Political History. The Kurdish people have had a long and complicated political existence. Their homeland of Kurdistan has never been an independent country. The majority of the Kurdish population, estimated at over 30 million, lives in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran; there are smaller communities in Syria and the Soviet Union. Efforts to establish autonomy have been repeatedly crushed, as they have been closely tied to changeable political events within the host countries.

While many Kurds today hope to someday live in an independent Kurdistan, the politics of the Middle East work against it. The Kurds remaining in that region face strong political and social pressures to give up their cultural identity, and their continued survival as a separate ethnic group is in jeopardy. However, the ongoing suppression of Kurdish language and culture, particularly in Turkey and Iraq, has not quelled the strong Kurdish nationalist movement.

Religion. After the Arab conquest of the Kurdistan region in the 7th century, most Kurds converted to Islam. Adherence to Sunni Moslem traditions has provided a strong moral fabric, unified Kurdish communities, and provided guidance on social and political issues. Islamic beliefs have provided an important cultural identity and continuity with the past; more than simply a religion, Islam is viewed as a way of life by the Kurds.

Moslems recognize Allah as the eternal god, the same god worshipped by Jews and Christians. The book of the Qur'an (or Koran), believed to be dictated from God to the messenger Mohammed, is a fundamental and immutable source of doctrine. Five pillars of the faith are followed: profession of faith in God (shahada) and Mohammed as his messenger; daily prayer; payment of alms (Zakat); annual fasting; and pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj).

Local congregations gather in the mosque on Fridays to show unity by sharing in common worship. A mosque is not a church, but simply a building for group prayer; it has no sanctified altar or statuary. It may in fact be used as a hall, shelter, or library during the rest of the week. However, it is customary to remove one's shoes before

entering. Most mosques have two unique features: the minaret, a tower from which the faithful are called to prayer; and the mahrib, a niche in the wall indicating the direction of Mecca to which believers face as they pray.

There is no priesthood in Islam; nothing is seen to come between a man and God. An imam, a religious leader or teacher, may open services by reviewing the week's spiritual life of the community and offering advice on holy living. In smaller communities, the speaker is likely to be one of the congregation who has some advanced religious training. Believers are expected to follow the simple tenets:

-accept God and His message
-be honest and truthful
-practice charity and mercy
-treat others fairly and justly
-defend the faith against nonbelivers
-pray regularly
-live modestly
-avoid arrogance and slander
-please your parents

In addition, Moslems have social and legal duties to refrain from alcohol, loan-sharking, gambling, and fortune-telling. Women are considered equal in the faith and have the same duties, although traditionally, it is usually men who are called upon to lead, fight, hunt, preach, and make laws. Historically, and in contrast to many other Islamic cultures, Kurdish women are not veiled and are free to associate with men socially. If needed, they have often assumed important roles in tribal leadership.

The influence of Islam can be observed in the attitudes and behaviors of the Kurdish people: they exhibit devoutness, moral restraint, honesty, hospitality, and generosity. Passionate religious discipline is valued but tempered by personal humility before God.

Traditional Life

Economy. The Kurdish people have essentially been mountain farmers and herdsmen living in family groups within organized tribes. In their agrarian communities, people lived closely off the land rather than exchanging services or labor for money. Traditional crops included wheat, barley, tobacco, rice, and fruit. Cows and chickens have provided meat and eggs. Sheep and goats have supplied cheese and yogurt, as well as wool and hair for cloth. Horses were an integral part of Kurdish society; horse-raising and horsemanship have long

been an important cultural activity.

While modern Kurds are considerably urbanized, rural Kurds still follow a traditional division of labor. The men work outside of the home with crops, orchards, and large animals, and the women manage household tasks and tend small animals, such as chickens and goats.

Kurdish diet is centered around bread, rice, dairy products, and meat. Gardens provide onions, cucumbers, tomatoes, and potatoes; several of these vegetables are used to make **zalata**, a tangy sauce served on rice. Melons, raisins, pistachios, and almonds are also grown and eaten. A type of round pita bread, called **nan** (nahn), is still mixed and kneaded in huge bowls as it has been for centuries. It is usually eaten with toppings of vegetable and meat, and with tahina, or sesame paste. Stuffed cabbage and grape leaves are also a popular main dish. Tea, milk, and grape juice are staple drinks for adults and children; alcohol and pork are taboo because of Islamic restrictions.

Festivals. Weddings are the biggest events, lasting three days and attended by the whole village. They are commonly held in the warmer months. "*Nwerroz*" (pronounced "now-oo-rooz" and also known as Persian New Year) is a great celebration on March 21st, with special foods, fireworks, dancing, singing, and poetry. Other holidays are based on the shifting Islamic lunar calendar. *Mohammed's birthday* is traditionally observed with poems written and recited to honor the Prophet and Islamic heritage. *Eid al-Fitr*, a feast following the Islamic Ramadan, is an occasion for dressing up, eating well, and exchanging cards. During the month-long *Ramadan*, which celebrates the revealing of the Koranic verses to Mohammed, Moslems above about the age of 10 refrain from eating, drinking, and smoking during daylight hours to show allegiance to God's commands. The fast is not required of young children, the sick, pregnant women, new mothers or travelers, who have the choice of fasting or not. Ramadan is a collective and unifying Moslem experience meant to demonstrate mastery of worldly concerns and foster compassion for the hungry and thirsty.

Dress. The costume varies from region to region, and most of the younger Kurds have adopted westernized dress in the cities. Men have traditionally worn loose-fitting pants with a sash and dagger at the waist, and a turban. Women have worn long peasant-style dresses with harem pants beneath, a head scarf and shawl. The clothing reflects the Kurdish love of color; embroidered and hand-knitted fabrics are common. Pictured below are some examples of traditional dress.

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Language. Like English, Kurdish is an Indo-European language.It is related to Persian Farsi, with two major spoken dialects: Bahdinan in the northern regions and Sorani in the south. There is no standard written language, although one is now being developed by Kurdish scholars. The systems of writing Kurdish differ by country, with considerable variation. In Iran and Iraq, a modified Arabic script is used and many books and magazines are available in this form of Kurdish. Other countries impose their own language upon the Kurds within their borders: Syria and Turkey have suppressed both the oral and written forms of Kurdish.

Rural Kurds have always relied on spoken language for communication and many older adults do not read or write. Within Kurdish culture, skillful use of language is highly valued; witty repartee is considered a social asset. Strong efforts by the government to replace the Kurdish language with Arabic have been partially effective, and Kurdish is replete with Arabic words. Many Kurdish children are taught Arabic in school and in order to read the Qur'an, which is traditionally recited only in Arabic. It is not uncommon for younger Kurds to be fluent in three or more languages: Kurdish, Arabic, and the language of the region. In Iraq, English is taught beginning in the 5th grade; however, because of the war and evacuation, younger children have received little English training.

As refugee students adapt to American schools, they will gradually acquire English. Until then, they will rely on their first language for communication. Research has shown that prohibiting use of the first language can inhibit acquisition of new languages. For readers seeking details, Ventriglia (1982) and Rigg & Allen (1989) provide interesting insights (see Resources Section).

The Modern Kurdish World

Lifestyle. Before recent events leading to the latest war against them and subsequent evacuation from their homes, most Kurds in northern Iraq lived a comfortable life in small mountain villages. The average village, of 1000-2000 people, was made up of economically independent households occupied by a single nuclear family or an extended patrilocal group. Schools were available and socialized medicine was provided in city hospitals by the oil-rich Iraqi government. Homes, built of brick and cement, had electricity and televisions,

although few telephones. Cooking was done over wood firepits out of doors.

Kurdish city dwellers, who have migrated to urban areas for jobs, have more marketable skills and wealth. Members of the working and professional classes, they have taken jobs in the oil fields, or as butchers, bricklayers, and small traders in large cities, and lead modern lifestyles. Although ways of life have varied according to livelihood, a strong Islamic faith, common cultural heritage, and desire for a united homeland continues to bind all Kurds.

For the agrarian Kurds, life in America requires many adjustments. Many villagers made a good living off the land and were quite wealthy farmers. Because of the change in livelihood, much more of their day-to-day lives are concerned with simply surviving in their new homes. The Kurds find hospital care in the U.S. is generally better than in Iraq, but are shocked at the high costs of our medical system. Even small details of daily life can be wearing. The older women are uncomfortable using kitchen counter tops for food preparation, preferring to mix ingredients and knead bread while squatting on the floor. Home telephones remain a novelty for many and it has taken time to learn to use them.

Behavior. Kinship relations are vital. The Kurds keep close contact with family and friends, visiting each other's homes frequently for conversation and camaraderie. Meals are often taken together by several families, with the children eating separately from the adults. Older women gather together to spin wool and knit; men smoke and share stories of warand famous heroes. Young people participate in sports like soccer and volleyball. On Fridays, the men and older boys gather at the local mosque for group prayer. Weddings and births are occasions for celebrations with special foods, dancing and singing.

Kurdish social behavior has been variously characterized by historians and anthropologists as "independent" and "unruly" with a "competitive clan structure" and "warlike stance". These descriptions, subjective at best, might be explained by Kurdish defensive reactions to the hostility and threats which they have endured for generations. It could also be said that they are a fierce, proud people who prize a rebellious spirit. This is true for females as well as males, although cultural practices generally subordinate females to males and the young to the old.

Kurdish children receive much attention from adults and older

siblings; there is a lot of touching and physical contact. Babies are often swaddled and massaged, and older children are caressed and bounced as well as gently slapped, and roughly hit and kicked. Children are usually left to work out squabbles and disagreements among themselves: adults only step in when more serious violence arises. Authority over children is distributed among the social group, so obedience is not solely oriented toward one set of parents, but spread among uncles, grandparents, and older cousins. Kurdish children are allowed much more freedom of activity at a younger age than are mainstream American children. At times this has led to injuries from cooking fires, exposure, and other outside dangers.

In America, different expectations for behavior are likely to cause strain within refugee families. The Kurds have been placed in isolated groups, cut off from others in their community. The smaller population of Moslems in the U.S. provides fewer church contacts and facilities at the same time western culture offers more secular temptations. Kurdish youngsters, sampling western lifestyles, may try out new behaviors and receive the disapproval of parents. The Kurds will face social criticism of their child-rearing practices. And some Kurdish males may be disturbed to discover a greater number of female authority figures in their daily lives.

Kurdish Names. Kurdish children usually have three names, for example, Kayhan Abdullah Fetah. The first name is the given name, chosen by the mother and father. The middle name is the father's first name, and the last name is the first name of the paternal grandfather. Care should be taken when spelling Kurdish names in English.

A woman does not take on her husband's name at marriage, and so she has a different last name than her children. It is customary for Kurds to be called by their first names, even in formal situations; and it is not uncommon for children to address their parents by first name rather than calling them "mother" and "father".

School. Formal education is highly valued in Kurdish culture. In their school system youngsters are expected to attend first grade at age 7 and progress through the grades and into high school at age 15. Progression to higher grades is based on competency tests beginning from the earliest grades. Fathers are the main contact between the home and school; they are generally asked to attend at least two progress meetings each year in addition to an orientation assembly.

After high school, many students go to trade schools for two or three years to study nursing, teaching, agriculture, or mechanics. A few attend four-year colleges in the city.

Reading and writing are considered very important; but because there has been no standardized Kurdish language, schoolchildren are taught the language of the majority culture of the region, generally Arabic or Turkish. In most cases, this practice serves the purpose of suppressing Kurdish nationalism by preventing the spread of Kurdish language and culture and forcing acceptance of the majority language. In Iraq, the government has also required membership in the majority's political party as prerequisite for enrolling children in school. Such practices, along with interruptions caused by war and displacement, have provided only irregular periods of schooling for children during the past several generations. Thus young refugees entering America have had few consistent school experiences; some of the girls arrived without any reading or writing skills.

Despite continuing political turmoil, Kurdish people believe strongly in the value of formal education. During four years in at least one Turkish refugee camp, a laudable attempt was made by the Kurds to provide schooling for the children. The remarkable description that follows was gleaned from the documents and personal account of a Kurdish teacher at the Mardin camp.

Camp School. In 1988, the Mardin, Kiziltepe camp in Turkey opened and accepted over 8000 Iraqi Kurds. Of that number, about 2,800 were children of school age. During its first year, there was no school, and children spent their days searching for diversion within the confines of the one square-kilometer fenced perimeter. This led to mischief and vandalism, and children were often disciplined harshly by Turkish police who guarded the camp. Although the government banned schools within the camp unless they were taught in Turkish, some of the Kurdish leaders decided to begin secretly offering classes in reading, writing, and math. Limited tent facilities forced the five teachers to teach 300 students in shifts, from morning to night. The children were eager to attend, the classes became more popular, and the makeshift school quickly grew.

At first, they had no class supplies or materials. Chalkboards were improvised with black cooking pans and white sandstone. For writing paper, the children collected paper from their fathers' cigarette packs and it was bound into pads. The students patiently waited to use one

of the 3-4 pencils that were shared in each class. Although facilities were meager, the teachers were eventually able to offer lessons in religion, math, agriculture, social studies, sports and art, as well as in Kurdish, Arabic, and Latin. Older students also received some English language instruction.

After two years, the camps were opened to United Nations inspectors, who asked to tour the schools. With their help, the Kurds were allowed more freedom in setting up schools and going outside of the camp for needed supplies. The U.N. provided 20 large tents for classrooms and brought in supplies of paper and pencils. With this help, the refugees were able to organize a more efficient education system. Camp elections were held and more adults were chosen to manage the school and teach; before the camp shut down in 1992, there were 45 teachers and 2,500 students. A school manager observed and evaluated teaching methods, a testing system was established to report student progress through classes and grades, and permanent records were kept so that students could receive credit for their educational experiences at the camp. Today, the reputation of the Barzani School at the Mardin Refugee Camp is respected in most Kurdish communities.

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PART 2

KURDISH REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES

It is clear that Kurdish students are beginning school with cultural experiences vastly different from that assumed for most mainstream youngsters. With little prior exposure to western culture, it has been a tremendous shock for them to be placed in suburban apartments, required to learn another new language, and exposed to new customs and rules of social etiquette. Years in the refugee camps disrupted family life, interrupted educational progress, and caused great psychological stress and uncertainty. An understanding of these factors and their effects on refugee families can aid in ameliorating potential problems the students face in American schools.

Effects of War and Evacuation. Kurdish refugee children were born or spent much of their childhoods in the brutal conditions of war. They carry the psychological and developmental scars of seeing violence inflicted on family and friends. Such experiences can cause recurring nightmares, introversion, and extended anxiety. There are many relatives still living in the war zone, and much family discussion and concern remains centered on stories and messages from those left behind.

Thousands of Iraqi Kurds fled to Turkey after being driven from their homes by Saddam Hussein's soldiers. During evacuation, families were faced with the dangers of death, separation, and deprivation. They escaped through the mountains on a three-day, nonstop trek in harsh weather. Turkish refugee camps offered safety but few human comforts. Evacuees slept in large groups in uninsulated tents, vulnerable to strong winds. A water shortage meant there were few latrines and no showers. There was little relief from the extreme heat of summer and the freezing temperatures of winter, when the barren grounds turned to mud. The refugees were not permitted to leave the camps or to work, so they spent their days waiting for permission to emigrate to another country, which often took four years or more. The stark conditions of the camps provided little stimulation for children, and boredom and uncertainty about the future affected normal childhood development. Despite the makeshift schools and volunteer

teachers, the formal education process was interrupted.

American teachers will often be providing the first formal experience with school for this group of immigrants. It cannot be assumed that the children will have an awareness of mainstream classroom etiquette: simple behaviors such as listening, taking turns to speak, and walking in line may have to be taught and reinforced. Some will need help with printed English; opening a book and reading from left to right may be new tasks. The refugee students may need time for exploration of unfamiliar types of equipment and supplies, or briefings for special events such as school pictures, assemblies, and sports events.

Changing Roles and Lifestyles. In Iraq, Kurdish families enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle and many had considerable land and stock holdings which they lost during their displacement. The Kurds in America face a considerable drop in socioeconomic status and drastic changes in their daily lives. The father is often unemployed or underemployed, and wives may be working outside the home for the first time. The family may depend upon community charity from local church groups or state welfare for an extended period. These changes can cause confusion and insecurity within the family, as roles change and adaptations are made.

Kurdish parents struggle to adjust to a completely different society. Many are unfamiliar with western culture and the suburban lifestyle into which they have been adopted. Most feel homesick, out of place, and isolated. They will likely find school settings unfamiliar and feel unsure about the expectations for behavior. They may find it hard to integrate their religious beliefs and practices into daily life; for example, work requirements usually conflict with the Friday call to prayer. Living arrangements may cut them off from friends and kin. Their depression and worry can affect the children's ability to adapt.

Because of low incomes, families are forced to share low-cost houses and apartments. Ten or more people may live in a two-bedroom unit. They wear donated clothes, and have little feel for matching colors or styles according to western custom, so children often come to school in mismatched outfits, or wearing inappropriate colors, for example, boys wearing pink slacks. Following Kurdish custom, clothes are often worn in several layers that may be too warm or too cold for the weather. Shoes are often ill-fitting or unsuitable for school activities.

Teachers can readily help refugees with some of these transitions. One way is simply to be aware and understand that everyday survival takes a great deal of energy. Teachers can help foster understanding of the newcomers in the classroom by helping mainstream classmates understand the plight of refugees. Certain awkward situations can become opportunities to discuss cultural differences and the importance of acceptance. Students can be encouraged to develop compassion and sensitivity. A teacher's tactful comment to a parent about clothing choice may help a child avoid the pain of embarrassment and teasing.

Kurdish and English. Because of their common Indo-European origins, Kurdish and English share some cognates: for example, "bra" is brother; "moder" is mother; "dot" is daughter; and "du" is two. The Nashville area Council of Community Services has published an English-Kurdish glossary of some simple terms (see p.25)

The sounds of Kurdish are very different from English. For example, Kurdish has several consonant sounds not used in English, such as the ch sound found in the German "ich". Kurdish has two r sounds; one is trilled and the other is similar to the r in the British "very". English has some sounds that are absent from Kurdish. For example, the English vowel system is more complex than that of Kurdish, and is likely to cause problems in pronunciation for Kurdish ESL. Kurds may have trouble with the vowel sounds u, i, e, as in but, bit, and bet, as well as the sounds ou and oa in bought and boat. Although most Kurds are familiar with the English th sounds in this and thin because they are used in Arabic, they consider them to be peculiarly un-Kurdish sounds, and may find them difficult to pronounce.

Kurdish grammar differs from English in several ways. Word order is typically subject-object-verb, compared to the English subject-verb-object. Subject pronouns are normally omitted in Kurdish, though they may be used to add emphasis. Verbs combine with verbal particles to create idiomatic verb phrases, much like English two-word verbs, such as we have in the phrase "look up the number". Also, Kurdish uses a multi-purpose connector, -i or -y, to indicate the meaning of the English prepositions "of", "that", and "who" in noun and adjective phrases. This practice may lead a Kurdish student to translate the English "of" as the equivalent of -i and mistakenly say "grapes of green" or "a man of angry", etc.

Language Barriers. With little previous exposure to the English language, many Kurds experience great frustration in meeting survival needs at first. County refugee services provide basic English classes and job referrals, but families are forced to rely on their more-established countrymen and American hosts for help with day to day needs, such as shopping and transportation. This dependence is distressing to a people who prize their independence.

Unfamiliarity with written language causes barriers for the Kurds in a society dependent on computers and technology for many daily tasks. Using the telephone book, filling in applications, and even signing one's name can be formidable tasks. This impersonal manner of acquiring services and goods is alien and confusing to the agrarian Kurds. Emphasis in American schools upon written language for directions and assignments puts Kurdish youngsters at a disadvantage until they acquire English skills. Until then, they rely on classmates for cues about appropriate responses and thus remain one step behind other students.

The language barrier also limits interaction with mainstream society. They are restricted in getting information and knowledge of the new society. Even simple conversations with neighbors are limited; a translator must assist with visits to medical facilities and government agencies. At school conferences, teacher talk can be overwhelming; parents may not know what is expected of them. As is usually the case, children are faster at picking up the new language and usually assist their parents with translation. However, this can lead to family problems if the child is not mature enough to accept such responsibility or if the parent feels his or her authority is being usurped. Normal child development may be accelerated or complicated by uneven family relationships if teens have better communication skills and take advantage of this power.

Teachers can be aware that written notices may present a problem when they arrive at home. Nonliterate parents will find them indecipherable, and students may need help explaining special school events and activities. Parents may not be aware of normal procedures to follow if they need extra help, for example, in setting up academic tutoring or afternoon sports practice. Parents may not have transportation to get to school for meetings, or may have children in different schools, making it hard to attend several conferences. Work and child-

care obligations may also make it hard to attend.

A visit to the home or telephone call early in the year can establish whether help with translation will be needed. Home visits also provide teachers with an understanding of the dynamics of family roles and relationships, and information about family resources, such as the number of children, and availability of cars and child-care. In Iraq, teachers have commonly been invited to Kurdish homes: visits establish rapport and maintain a good level of communication.

Conflicting Values. Certain behavior valued in traditional Kurdish culture may conflict with that expected in American classrooms. In younger children, frequent physical contact with peers, unbridled competitiveness, open rebelliousness, and free expression of anger are likely to be perceived negatively by school personnel. Because children have more freedom in Kurdish society and are not as pressed to control their emotions, teachers may find these students have different concepts of appropriate classroom and playground behavior. The social pattern of group control over children in Kurdish homes may cause the children to be more attentive to peers than to the single authority of the teacher. The youngsters will gradually acquire classroom etiquette; in the meantime, it may help to alternate passive academic tasks with more physically active ones.

In contrast, older Kurdish children and teens have more restrictions on their behavior and are allowed less independence than their American peers. Young Kurdish adults have more family responsibilities and are expected to stay at home longer, even after they marry. In the U.S., they are likely to hold part-time jobs or to care for younger siblings much of the time. They tend to be very serious about schoolwork. Dating and intimacy with the opposite sex is prohibited.

Kurdish teens will likely have many questions about American customs and traditions like school dancing and suggestive slang terms. They will be exposed to behavior and language considered profane by Moslem standards. We must remember that these young people have not been raised in western culture with its broadly interpreted moral standards; they have not before seen beer commercials with bikini-clad models, nor personal hygiene products so openly displayed. It is important to show sensitivity to their curiosity while we demonstrate respect for their family's beliefs. The best course sometimes may be to refer students to their parents or another Kurdish adult, especially if the teacher feels uncomfortable about the topic.

Religious Differences. Kurdish Moslems view their culture as inextricably tied to religion; for them, Islam is a way of life. In America, few teachers are likely to have knowledge of Islam and its practices, or to be familiar with Kurdish culture. This may lead Kurds to feel their native culture and religious beliefs are not valued and may make it hard for students to develop their own sense of identity.

Including information about Kurdish history or Islamic beliefs in classroom study is one way teachers can show they value students' culture. Families might be asked to loan books or videos about their homeland. Students might be asked to demonstrate a unique ability or talent (after they have developed confidence in English). The students have specialized knowledge and strengths that can be tapped if we view them as resources for learning about another culture.

Because they are unfamiliar with American culture, Moslem Kurds are very careful about eating new foods. Pork is regularly included on school breakfast plates (as bacon or sausage) and in lunch items (such as pizza toppings and hot dogs). Other foods, which look like pork products, are avoided too, even though they may be made from poultry. The multitude of ingredients that go into our foods can pose a problem for those used to simpler fare and who do not read English well. Even an inoffensive drink like root beer may be suspected and avoided because of its name!

There are simple measures that can be taken to help students follow Islamic restrictions on their diet. First, school staff can be alerted to the various restrictions on certain foods. Students can be helped to identify different food items through lessons focusing on reading and understanding menus and lists of ingredients. They can also be guided to ask appropriate questions tactfully to determine the content of proffered food. Such discussions would be ideal times to compare cultures and beliefs, and to celebrate our diversity.

The month-long Ramadan holiday compares in importance to the American Christmas holiday. Much time is spent in preparation, and there are many exciting family activities during the festival. Older children are encouraged to fast, along with the adults, to demonstrate their devoutness. The daily fast is broken after dark, often celebrated in local traditions with a large feast and party, which continues late into the night. Children's schedules may be disrupted and the hours of sleep curtailed, with the result that they may have difficulty functioning at school. During Ramadan it may be difficult for students to

concentrate as usual, and teaching can be as trying as during December's holiday season. Teachers would be wise to check the date in advance and take the celebration into account while lesson-planning.

PART 3

EDUCATIONAL SUGGESTIONS

Understanding the culture and past experiences of refugee students is the first step toward meeting their needs. The next question is: what educational strategies can be used to enhance language acquisition and cross-cultural communication and to promote academic success in ESL and mainstream classes? This section will examine the implications of recent research in sociolinguistics and offer practical suggestions for working with second language students.

One of the most important points to keep in mind is that learning English takes a significant period of time. In fact, while "playground" English can develop within two years, it takes a minimum of 4-5 years for students to achieve a grade-appropriate level of academic language proficiency. Even then, they will continue to refine their skills and internalize grammar and vocabulary. Thus, teachers should not set unrealistic goals about how fast our ESL students will learn English. Older students, especially those who arrive in the U.S. at age 12 and above, need the most time to acquire language and are at greatest academic risk.

Recent research has shifted the focus of teaching away from language and onto the learner. Rather than stressing particular methods or materials, studies are now examining specific elements of the learning situation and the needs of the learner as crucial factors in second language acquisition. This new approach is congruent with trends in educational reform toward whole-language, student-centered programs.

Studies show that second language development, like the first, proceeds globally rather than linearly, so learners acquire language best when actively involved in meaningful activities requiring the second language. Language develops in low-anxiety environments rich in natural language experiences, where learners receive the comprehensible input necessary for acquisition. In addition, settings that include the first language and culture of students help them achieve a positive self-identity and sense of confidence. These factors are important to healthy cognitive and psychological development as students acquire academic skills and literacy.

EDUCATIONAL SUGGESTIONS

Such research has obvious implications for our classrooms. The following suggestions illustrate how recent findings can be applied in our schools; they have been compiled from various sources.

Specific Suggestions

1. ***Be aware of how you communicate as a teacher.*** ESL students need to hear simplified language, with key words and ideas repeated or paraphrased. Respect the beginning speakers' "silent period"; do not force students to speak before they are ready. Instead, provide a way for them to take part in lessons through physical activities that demonstrate their comprehension.

Be especially clear when giving directions and presenting new information. Avoid the overuse of idioms. Check for understanding often by eliciting student responses: be sure to require responses at basic cognitive and linguistic levels as well as at higher levels of taxonomy. For example, ESL students can participate by answering yes-or-no questions or by recalling simple facts. Watch for blank stares and puzzled looks. Don't raise anxiety levels by putting ESL students on the spot.

2. ***Avoid direct error correction.*** Language development proceeds globally, and mistakes in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar are a part of the natural progression. Over attention to errors raises anxiety about making a mistake and can interfere with the flow of meaning. Teachers and peers can encourage beginning speech by focusing on a speaker's ability to communicate rather than on grammar and form. It is best to make corrections indirectly by repeating what is said in correct form. Students will naturally self-correct as they reach higher levels of comprehension, and according to their specific interests and self-perceived needs. When attention to errors is necessary, balance it with positive comments, keep suggestions simple and at the proper level of proficiency.

3. ***Keep goals and expectations realistic.*** Provide sufficient time for students to make adjustments, particularly early in the school year when a lot of information must be absorbed. If possible, employ a pass/fail grading system at first, to reduce external stress and encourage feelings of success in students. Positive reinforcement is vital to

acquisition of academic skills and content.

ESL students have different language proficiencies. Their skills develop along a continuum, beginning with receptive listening skills and proceeding to speaking, reading, and writing. It is vital that teachers continually consider this sequence in planning and instruction. Our students must absorb and process an overwhelming amount of input as they acquire language; teachers can help by providing abundant repetition and meaningful activities. Be patient and understand that it may take some children longer to pick up specific skills.

4. ***Make lectures and presentations accessible.*** Content-area teachers and others who use lecture can provide the means for ESL students to absorb and understand the material. Oral talks can be recorded on audio- or videotape; native speakers can be asked to share class notes. (Asking other students to simplify textbook pages for ESL students by rewriting short sections is also useful as a review tool for the entire class). Teachers should take care that the lessons relate in some way to students' lives.

During presentations, emphasize key words by writing them on the board and through repetition and intonation. Use visuals and gestures to map out ideas, and give concrete examples whenever possible. Make transitions and digressions obvious by announcing them; use pauses liberally to allou students time for processing. Encourage students to restate or rephrase key points and invite others to react with questions or clarification.

5. ***Make the classroom an authentic language environment.*** Use real books and real writing experiences rather than basals and worksheets. Include activities centered on real life, the community, classroom charts and routines. Provide time for sustained silent reading, daily journals, teacher-read stories, and student sharing. Stimulate language use with concrete materials such as toys and puzzles, picture books, art and craft supplies, clay, puppets, and musical instruments. Most of these forms of "realia" are appropriate for both younger and older students.

6. ***Integrate ESL students with native speakers as much as possible.*** ESL learners need many opportunities to use language in diverse situations: they can learn as much or more about communicating on the playground as they do in the classroom. Dynamic social interac-

tions require negotiation for meaning, and provide the best input of language, particularly repetitions, expansions, and extensions.

Provide a warm environment in which help is readily available. Pairing students through a buddy system or peer teaching can benefit both students. This strategy is especially useful when new students arrive and need much practical information about the school, its functions, and expected behaviors.

7. ***Promote student-to-student interactions.*** Classrooms can be organized so that small groups of first-language and second-language students work together on meaningful tasks. Active engagement in meaningful activities provides the context and relevance, as well as plentiful practice, needed for language acquisition. Group work increases opportunities for language practice and improves speech quality. Students have the chance to develop complex and logical conversation and use language in a wide range of roles and purposes. Group work is also amenable to individualizing instruction, since materials and tasks can be selected for specific needs and interests. Finally, small groups promote a less-formal and supportive class environment that motivates learners to relax and participate.

Cooperative learning activities are ideal because they promote learning while fostering respect and friendship within heterogeneous groups. ESL students can acquire learning strategies from observing their peers, and mainstream students can benefit from practicing social skills and roles and working through problems as a team. Tasks which require positive interdependence also benefit groups because they demand collaboration and the inclusion of all students.

8. ***Incorporate students' first language and culture.*** While it would be nearly impossible to achieve fluency in the first language of all of our students, a few basic terms and numbers are easy and fun to learn. Visits to students' homes, and use of Kurdish phrases and cultural information promote participation and trust. Such interest reassures students that their home culture and language are important and accepted, and helps mainstream students appreciate the richness and worth of other cultures. Learning about these aspects of students' lives also provides information about the norms and standards of behavior that influence our students. Such knowledge is helpful is assisting in their adjustment to American schools.

Parents can be an integral part of the learning process if they are

encouraged and willing to participate. Involving them acknowledges their influence as our students' first teachers, and reinforces the value of their culture. Parents can add a positive element whether or not they are fluent and literate in English. For example, they might assist with art or music activities, or share a personal skill or craft. An advance planning session will help parent and teacher clarify specific expectations for the lesson and allow both to feel more at ease. When school provides a forum for sharing customs and traditions, parents are helped to maintain and pass along their cultural pride and identity, and welcomed to take an active role in their children's education.

9. ***Be prepared for cultural conflicts.*** Within any class there will be disparate student expectations and learning styles. Cultural differences will surely affect classroom interactions, and at times may disrupt the learning process if communication breaks down. Effective teachers watch for signs of cultural conflict: withdrawal, refusal to work with another student, or tension created by unspoken feelings. Teachers need to be sensitive to student relationships, as well as aware of their personal biases and cultural expectations. In this way, teachers can seek constructive solutions before conflicts escalate.

The first step is to analyze whether the source of the problem is cultural or personal. Cultural conflicts arise when culturally-determined expectations clash and students feel violated by other's words or actions. Students may feel they are being touched, interrupted, or imposed upon inappropriately. Feelings of helplessness and alienation can find expression in open hostility or passive aggression.

There are solutions at hand. It may be possible to defuse or avoid the problem in the early stages of development. This might be accomplished in private conversation with the involved students. The teacher can describe her perceptions of the situation, give specific examples of observed behavior, and explain how it disrupts the class. Then she can clearly state, or elicit suggestions for, expected alternative classroom behavior.

Another solution is to use conflicts as resources for teaching. By illuminating specific conflicting behaviors and the values behind them, the class can gain a new understanding and appreciation for different customs. To work well, however, such lessons need advance planning. Teachers would be wise to plan ahead and consider potential conflicting behaviors so as to be prepared with suitable lessons.

10. ***Collaborate with other teachers.*** Everyone gains from close and frequent staff communication. The sharing of teaching ideas, techniques, and activities is a dynamic part of a healthy school environment. Through collaboration, classroom teachers can better understand each child's language strengths and weaknesses and how they are being addressed by the language specialist. ESL teachers can gain awareness of the specific content objectives and skills covered in the child's regular classes. And students benefit from regular attention to their academic and emotional needs. Together, staff can plan appropriate goals for instruction, ensuring that language skills are reinforced and complemented throughout the school program.

Summary

These educational suggestions summarize some of the practical implications of recent studies in language learning. By applying findings of this recent research, classrooms can be created that are rich in authentic language experiences and that are naturally conducive to acquisition. Including topics and materials from students' first language and culture can further enhance the prospects for academic success and healthy psychological growth and demonstrate appreciation and respect for their unique world views.

KURDISH TO ENGLISH GLOSSARY

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PHRASES

hello, goodbye/ Salom

thank you/ supas

good morning/ bayani bash

what is your name/ nave ta chiya

my name is.../ nave man

how are you/ to cha wani

fine, thank you/ as bashim

yes/ bali

no/ no

look at this/ saykavay

PLACES

home/ maul

store/ dikan

lake/ badoff

bridge/ pedr

hospital/ hasda

park/ haddika

inside/ jshewfa

outside/ jshdava

school/ mactap

WEATHER

rain/ borran

sun/ roosh

lightning/ breesk

snow/ bafurd

cloud/ owood

thunder/ gilgilowra

PARTS OF THE BODY

face/ nafchaf

ear/ goh

eyes/ chaf

stomach/ zik

arm/ zandak

leg/ peh

foot/ yek-peh

hair/ perch

nose/ defin

mouth/ daf

back/ pisht

hand/ dast

knee/ peh

teeth/ didan

NUMBERS

one/ ek

two/ doo

three/ sey

four/ char

five/ pench

six/ shush

seven/ haft

eight/ hasht

nine/ nuh

ten/ dah

eleven/ eozda

twelve/ doozda

FOOD

carrot/ gaza

banana/ moos

meat/ goosht

sugar/ shager

water/ off

fish/ mossy

rice/ beninshk

breakfast/ desht

dinner/ sheef

bread/ nan

milk/ sheer

flour/ ar

tea/ char

apple/ sef

potato/ pitot

egg/ hegg

lunch/ feraven

DESCRIBING WORDS

good, OK/ basha

yesterday/ dahe

big/ mazen

right/ rost

hurt/ tichet

sad/ kham

easy/ ason

sick/ nahoos

today/ auro

tomorrow/ sobahe

little/ bacheek

left/ chap

happy/ cannee

angry/ cortan

hard/ shamat

on/ helka

COLORS

color/ ranga

blue/ sheen

green/ cask

purple/ benefshe

brown/ gahawaii

red/ sor

yellow/ zad

orange/ putakaly

black/ rush

white/ spee

ACTIONS

see/ dibenam

stand/ raba

stop/ rowoosta

bring/ beena

come/ wara

speak/ bahiva

wash/ bishoe

pull/ beena

sleep/ khow

laugh/ bicana

smile/ canna

cut/ breen

look/ timasha-ka

go/ hara

sit/ rena

swim/ melavan

drink/ vaha

play/ rayeek

push/ dahavda

walk/ ravachew

sing/ stron

work/ shool

make/ chaka

lift/ rocka

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Community Agencies

Council of Community Services. 2012 21st Avenue South, Nashville, TN, 37212. Phone: (615) 385-2221.

SOAR. (Sponsors Organized to Assist Refugees). A division of Church World Services. Jim Hardenbrook, Coordinator. 4900 North Five Mile Road, Boise, ID, 83704. Phone: (208) 376-4529.

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